

Crab 'enhancement' gets a tryout off Kodiak

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KODIAK -- Batches of baby king crabs could soon be growing in Kodiak Island waters, and scientists will be carefully nurturing their growth and progress.

If all goes according to plan, the project will be the first in Alaska to advance larval crabs from the laboratory to the wild.

The crabs will be hatched from 10 Bering Sea females this fall at the Alutiiq Pride Shellfish Hatchery at Seward, a first for that facility that until now has only raised and provided spat for oysters and clams. By next summer, as many as 200,000 tiny king crabs may be transplanted at Trident Basin, not far from downtown Kodiak.

"We'll be putting them in predator-avoidance structures so the little critters won't end up as cod bait," said Brian Allee, director of the Alaska Sea Grant College Program, a project sponsor.

"It takes about five years for a crab to mature, and eight years before it's market size," said federal crab biologist Sara Persselin, who will train and lead a research team for the project.

"We might include a 'crab cam' so anyone could log on to their computer and watch the baby crab," Persselin said. She added that researchers will eventually track the crabs' movements and migration.

Persselin and Allee are among the many Alaska scientists and educators who are building on the momentum created in March, when experts from several countries came to Kodiak to share science and stories about crab enhancement. Crab enhancement is not farming; rather, it involves growing crab to a certain size and releasing them into the wild, similar to Alaska's salmon hatcheries.

"As we understand more about crab culturing and transplanting, it could be replicated in other parts of the state," Allee said.

The enthusiasts need only point to the Barents Sea, atop Norway and Russia, where king crabs were transplanted 50 years ago. Estimates now peg the population at more than 12 million giant crabs and growing strong.

- Big crabs pinch markets. Crab is often sold in sections or clusters, according to how many legs make up a 10-pound box. Picture just four legs totaling 10 pounds, and you get an idea of the size of the king crabs coming from the Barents Sea.

The crabs average 10 pounds and can top 20 pounds, measuring 5 feet across. According to market expert John Sackton, two U.S. companies, Keyport Foods and Pacific Seafoods, have partnered with the major Russian crab producers, which control about 80 percent of the region's quota. This year the quota is 3 million animals, or roughly 30 million pounds. That compares to a king crab catch of 18 million pounds from Alaska, where the average weight is 6.5 pounds.

Sackton said Alaska crab pioneers liken the Barents Sea to the crab booms in Kodiak and Bristol Bay 30 years ago, but they are applying lessons learned. The companies mandate selective fishing gear that catches only jumbo crabs, leaving the smaller ones and the females on the bottom.

- "Deadliest Catch" catches viewers. The Discovery Channel's "Deadliest Catch" series has become one of the top rated nonsports shows on cable TV.

According to Media Life, the show, now in its second season, chronicles Alaska crab fishermen enduring freezing temperatures and waves up to 40 feet as they struggle to land crabs in giant 700-pound pots.

"If that sounds nearly impossible, and also sort of insane, consider this: While crab fishermen have an injury rate of nearly 100 percent, they can also support their families for an entire year through just a few months of work," an article said.

Laine Welch is a Kodiak-based fisheries journalist. Her Fish Radio programs can be heard on stations around the state. Her information column appears every other Saturday.

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